

Baisakhi Day of 1699: The Birth of the Khalsa

The first day of the month of Baisakh (March / April) is celebrated with a great deal of enthusiasm in Punjab. The festival marks the end of the previous agricultural cycle and the beginning of a new one. Baisakhi marks the beginning of a new year for a Punjabi farmers. The wheat crop is ready to be harvested in the villages and the farmers rejoice at the prospect of abundant food available to feed their families for the rest of the year with enough left over to sell in the market place to raise cash to pay off the personal loans and meet other family needs! The farmer families celebrate the festival by singing and dancing bhangra and giddha. Guru Amar Das turned the Baisakhi festival into a day for visiting the Guru. Later, Guru Gobind Singh chose the Baisakhi day of 1699 (30 March) to inaugurate the Khalsa Panth; there is a difference of opinion as to the exact year of the birth of the Khalsa ranging from 1689 to 1699.

At this point one may ask what led to the birth of the Khalsa? There is no short answer to this question. The idea of the Khalsa Panth seems to have evolved in Guru Gobind Singh's mind over a period of time. Main facts may be recounted as follows. First, Guru Tegh Bahadur (his father) was beheaded on orders from Emperor Aurangzeb in 1675; it is a story by itself to be told another time. The Sikhs in Dehli were paralyzed with fear so that no one came forward to claim the Guru's remains for several days until one Sikh (Lakhi Shah Lubana) came up with a clever idea, at some cost to him. On a very dark night, he set his own house on fire to distract the soldiers posted to guard Guru's remains and literally stole the Guru's remains from the public place (Chandni Chowk). Another Sikh (Bhai Jaita) brought Guru Tegh Bahadur's severed head to Guru Gobind Singh (then 9 years old) at the small town of Anandpur in Punjab. This sad experience left a deep impression on Guru Gobind Singh; it shaped his outlook and actions for the rest of his life. Second, in his youth Guru Gobind Singh had to contend with the evil schemes of his neighbors, the Rajput Hill Chieftains, who were jealous of his status in the community and the growing prosperity of Anandpur. He undertook a massive effort to fortify Anandpur by building forts at Anandgarh, Lohgarh, Keshgarh and Fatehgarh as a part of a defense plan and installed a big drum whose sound could reach for miles so that his army could be assembled quickly when need arose. This plan came in handy when Mughal forces attacked Anandpur a short time later. Guru Gobind Singh also tightened the organizational structure of the far flung communities by abolishing the corrupt institution of 'Masands;' these officials were appointed by Guru Amar Das to administer and take care of distant congregations but in time corruption crept in and many started pocketing Sikh offerings made to the Guru. In time, the Guru realized that 'the orchard of Sikh faith needed the thorny edge of armed men for its protection.' The Guru says, "When all efforts to restore peace fail and words are of no avail, it is lawful to hail the sword." The Guru was thus recalling the teaching of his grandfather Guru Hargobind, a half century later.

After a deep thought, Guru Gobind Singh summoned Sikhs from all over the country to assemble in Anandpur on the Baisakhi day of 1699 to receive a special message of great importance. They were to come wearing long hair and grown beards. The gathering at Kesgarh numbered close to 100,000, a day before the Baisakhi day. An excitement was in the air! They were taken aback when Guru Gobind Singh appeared before them with a drawn sword in his hand demanding, "Is there anyone among you ready to lay down his head at my call?" The bewildered audience was too shocked to respond! A few left. The Guru repeated his demand wondering whether his Sikhs would own up to his teachings. At the third call, Bhai **Daya Ram**, a thirty-year old *Khatri* from Lahore stood up and said, "Sir, my head is at your service. I am ready to taste the eternal bliss." The Guru dragged him into the tent set up for this purpose. A thud was heard and a stream of blood rushed out. The Guru appeared again, his sword dripped with fresh drawn blood, and repeated his call. The crowd was convinced that the Guru had killed Bhai Daya Ram. A dead silence followed. At the third call Bhai **Dharam Das**, a thirty-three old *Jat* from Dehli stood up and offered his head. He too was dragged into the tent. Another thud followed by a fresh stream of blood convinced the horror stricken people that the second Sikh had been killed too.

Many fled and the crowd thinned. The Guru emerged from the tent and called for another head. The dwindling audience was horror stricken. Still, Bhai **Mukham Chand**, a thirty-six year old *washer man* from Dwarka offered himself as a sacrifice to the Guru. He too was dragged into the tent. Another thud followed and people saw a new stream of blood flowing from the tent. The Guru came out again and repeated his demand for yet another head saying, “My Sikhs, come forward and taste the cup of life giving death.” The Sikhs were convinced that the Guru had gone mad. The call was repeated. At last Bhai **Sahib Chand**, a thirty-seven year old *barber* from Bidar got up. He apologized for taking too long in making up his mind and said, “Pardon my past failings and please accept my head!” The Guru dragged him into the tent. Another blow, another thud and a stream of blood followed stupefying the people who still had the courage to stay on. They prayed to the Almighty to cure the Guru of this strange malady and spare them further agony. The Guru appeared again and repeated his call to the fast dwindling crowd. This time Bhai **Himmat Rai**, a thirty-eight year old water-carrier from Jagannath answered the call. He was dragged into the tent and suffered the same fate as others before him. This time the Guru lingered in the tent longer. The crowd breathed a sigh of relief and hoped that the Guru was done with his calls for the day. At last the Guru came out. His sword sheathed, his face beaming with joy and satisfaction. But wait, who were they that came after him, looking strangely like him. They could not believe their eyes! The five had been killed, or so they thought, had they been revived (?). All five were attired like the Guru in saffron dyed robes and looked like the Guru himself, their faces beaming with a glow of unearthly joy. They had given him their heads and the Guru gave them his glory. They were the ‘Punj Piores’, they were to form the nucleus of a new order! There were exclamations of wonder and sighs of extreme regret. The Sikhs were tested and a few came out with colors flying. Guru gave them a sermon saying, in part, “When Guru Nanak tested his followers only one Sikh (Lehna) passed the test. Now five have proven their devotion to the Guru. This is a matter of joy and extreme satisfaction to us. I am convinced that true religion will flourish. Hail to these five dear ones who will bring glory to our people. Some, whose love for me is shallow thought I had gone mad and they fled from my presence. They are *Manmukhs*. Those who stayed behind are *Sanmukh*. The five who answered the call are *Gurmukhs*. In due course of time I shall test you again. Be aware, lest you fail again.” Shouts of Sat Sri Akal filled the air. The Sikhs got a glimmer of the path of sacrifice that the Guru laid out before them. The history is witness to the fact that Sikhs stood up to the lofty ideals placed before them that day by the Guru.

The next day was Baisakhi. The sangat assembled at the same spot. They were anxious as to what the Guru would do next. The Punj Piores were administered *Amrit* by the Guru who then knelt before them to be baptized in turn, in a fine example of fellowship of equality! In a resonant voice the Guru then recited a verse he had composed for the occasion, “*Wahe Guruji ka Khalsa, Wahe Guruji ki Fateh;*” it has since become a formal greeting among the Khalsa. In a few days, about 50,000 Sikhs were baptized into the new order. Please refer to the instructions that Guru gave the Khalsa that day in my earlier contribution on Guru Gobind Singh’s life.

The birth of the Khalsa alarmed the Hill Chieftains, in turn they turned to Emperor Aurangzeb (who was then in Deccan fighting the Marathas) to help them eliminate the new threat to his Empire. Several skirmishes took place for the next five years in which the Khalsa triumphed. Thoroughly alarmed, Aurangzeb ordered his Governor at Lahore to send a powerful force under the command of Nawab Wazir Khan of Sirhind to march on Anandpur. The new army aided by the Hill Chieftains laid a meticulously planned siege to Anandpur and cut off the food supplies to the besieged. The situation worsened rapidly after the hill stream that supplied water to Anandpur was diverted. At this point Aurangzeb guaranteed the Guru and his entourage a safe passage if they left Anandpur. A very difficult decision had to be made since the situation was getting worse by the day. At the close of 1704 the Guru decided to abandon Anandpur; he would never return. His enemies did not honor their word of safe passage, they attacked him near the banks of a small river Sirsa swollen with icy water from winter rains. The Guru’s ablest commander, Bhai Ude Singh and several of his men died in a rear-guard action to enable others to

cross the river. Khalsa suffered a huge loss of life and material. The Guru was separated from his mother and two younger sons who were betrayed by their Brahmin cook in a classic story of greed, more on that later.

Bhai Mani Singh, a distinguished Sikh scholar and a childhood friend and confidant of the Guru, escorted Guru's two wives (Mata Sundri and Sahib Kaur) to Dehli. The Guru with about 40 Sikhs including his two elder sons reached the village of Chamkaur several miles away, with Mughal forces in hot pursuit. The Guru and his companions took shelter in a hacienda; a Gurudwara now stands at that place called 'Garhi Sahib.' The battle of Chamkaur was fought on 22 December 1704. The Guru's sons Ajit Singh and Jujhar Singh as well as Mokham Singh and Himmat Singh (two of the original Punj Piaras) were killed in a fierce hand-to-hand combat. Inside Garhi Sahib there is a small room called 'Tilak Asthan.'" Here the Guru formally invested the Khalsa Panth with the responsibility of Guruship as his Successor for all times to come and ended the institution of Personal Guruship. Then the Guru accompanied by Bhai Daya Singh and Bhai Man Singh managed to evade the enemy at the dead of the night in an attempt to reach a safer place where Khalsa could regroup. Unfortunately, at the dawn the Guru found himself alone in the middle of Machhiwara forest without food, shelter, and his trusted mount; only his iron will sustained him in that bleak hour. Fortunately, his three companions were re-united with him shortly afterwards. The four accompanied by loyal Sikhs and some Muslim friends escaped detection by the enemy patrols searching for them and reached a Muslim village of Jatpura where the party was warmly received by Rai Kulha the village Chief. Here the Guru received the tragic news of the deaths of his mother Mata Gujri and his two young sons Zorawar Singh and Fateh Singh six and eight years old; they were bricked up alive on the orders of Wazir Khan. The Guru took the news calmly. He then moved to another place called Dina, later to become the Nabha State. Here he wrote the two letters to Aurangzeb in Persian verse, called Fatehnama consisting of twenty-four short stanzas in which he taunts the Emperor, "you do not deserve your name Aurangzeb (pride of the throne) since your ways are deceitful;" it was followed by a longer version (Zafarnama) in which he rebukes the Emperor for a breach of faith in allowing his troops to attack the Sikhs after Anandpur was vacated on his personal guarantee of safe conduct for the Guru and his entourage; he bluntly accused the Emperor and his underlings of lying. Aurangzeb (in Deccan) received these letters from Bhai Daya Singh and Bhai Dharam Singh. Instead of being infuriated by Zafarnama, Aurangzeb was moved by the Guru's incisive criticism and courage. He invited Guru Gobind Singh for a personal meeting with him in Deccan. Furthermore, the Emperor directed his officials to cease all hostilities against the Khalsa. The full promise of the peace at hand could not be achieved since Aurangzeb died shortly afterwards.

In Dina a whole new community of Sikhs rallied around Guru Gobind Singh; they felt outraged at the tragedies inflicted on the Guru. The news of the resurgence of the Khalsa in Dina alarmed Wazir Khan; he had become the Guru's impeccable enemy. In anticipation of an attack from him, the Guru left Dina and moved to a more defensible site at Khidrana (now called Muktsar). A pitched battle was fought here. Wazir Khan's forces suffered a defeat with huge losses of men on both sides. There is another story behind the episode at Muktsar to be told later.

From Muktsar the Guru moved to the forested area (called Lakhi Jungle) between Bhatinda and Kotkapura. Almost 100,000 Malwa jats embraced Sikhism under Guru's tutelage. The place where Guru Gobind Singh stayed is called Damdamma Sahib (a place of calm and tranquillity). Here the Guru revised the copy of Adi Granth, adding his father's hymns to it. This volume is now acknowledged the authorized version of Shri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS), the living Guru of the Sikhs. Many of the scholars who were with the Guru at Anandpur rejoined him making Damdama a Sikh Center of learning; it came to be known as Guru-ki-Kashi.

A strong bond existed between Guru Gobind Singh and the Khalsa; he was their darling and Guru adored them in turn. He was confident that Khalsa will triumph, overcoming all the hurdles. The Guru wrote several verses in the praise of the Khalsa. I quote some of them below to let the reader appreciate how close a bond existed between the Guru and the Khalsa.

“Khalsa is my special form, in Khalsa I reside
Khalsa is the fibre of my being, I am always with the Khalsa
Khalsa is an object of my worship, Khalsa is my nature
Khalsa is my support and protection, Khalsa is my peace and pleasure
Khalsa is my close friend, Khalsa is my mother, father, and peace of mind
Khalsa is my dignity and elation, Khalsa is my friend and comrade
Khalsa is my caste and honor, Khalsa has given birth to me
Khalsa is my palace and treasure, because of Khalsa I am respected
Khalsa is my friend and family, Khalsa is my contentment
Khalsa is my body and soul, Khalsa is my life
Khalsa is certainly my honor, Khalsa is my greatest ideal
Khalsa is my sustenance, Khalsa is my body and soul
Khalsa is my dharma and karma, Khalsa is my great secret
Khalsa is my perfect Guru, Khalsa is my brave companion
To Khalsa I owe wisdom and knowledge, Khalsa is the object of my meditation
The glory of Khalsa cannot be told, I have but one tongue
Even if I had thousand tongues, the greatness of Khalsa could not be explained
I am not exaggerating, I swear in the name of God and Guru Nanak
If each hair on my head were a tongue, it would sing praises of the Khalsa
I belong to the Khalsa, and Khalsa belongs to me
As a drop of water merges into the ocean, so I am merged in the Khalsa.”

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“Our victories in battles have been won through their favor,
Through their favor we have given alms,
Through their favor our troubles have vanished,
Through their favor our storehouses have been replenished,
Through their favor we have acquired knowledge,
Through their favor our enemies have been vanquished,
Through their favor we are exalted,
Without their favor we would be worse off than countless of the poor people.”

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“Khalsa is the one who does not speak ill of others,
Khalsa is the one who fights in the front lines
Khalsa shall rule the world, no one will be able withstand their onslaught
Only those who gain the Guru’s grace will be saved.”

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Khalsa overcomes the five limitations, and fulfills his obligations
Khalsa is the one who gives up ego and does not lust after women
Khalsa is the one who loves Wahe Guru and fights bravely in a conflict
Khalsa is the one who helps the needy and opposes the tyranny
Khalsa is the one who chants the Naam and shuns the evil
Khalsa is the one who is in sync with Naam and out of sync with false rituals
Khalsa is the one who is a crusader ever ready to fight oppression
Khalsa is the one who is always well armed with weapons to destroy the evil.”

The verses indicate that in Guru’s mind Khalsa was his co-equal. Sadly, Guru Gobind Singh died in Deccan in 1708 at a (young) age of forty-two before he could mould the political outlook of the Khalsa to avail of the opportunities available in the post- Aurangzeb period. More later.

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